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The Social Base of New Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Class Struggle and the Imperial Mode of Living

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This research note addresses the question of the social base of new authoritarianism and sketches out new directions for future research. In Europe and the United States, this question has led to highly controversial debates between two camps. One side argues for a class analysis and sees a revolt of the disenfranchised and poor behind the electoral success of the right-wing populists. The other side draws on the concept of the Imperial Model of Living and focuses on a cross-class alliance in the North, defending their unsustainable consumption pattern, which rests on the exploitation of resources, sinks, and cheap labor from the South. It will be argued that a view from Southeast Asia – especially data from Thailand and the Philippines – has the potential to challenge some assumptions of this debate and add important insights. Here, a rising middle-class has been in the focus of the debate on democratization in the 1980s/1990s. Starting with the Asia Crisis in 1997/1998, the rise of the new authoritarianism has also been linked to middle-class mobilization. Finally, due to the proximity to China and historical links, the re-orientation of middle-classes towards China provides insights into the micro processes behind the shift in the global economic system.

Keywords: Imperial Mode of Living; Middle-Class; Multiple Crisis; New Authoritarianism

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THE SOCIAL BASE OF NEW AUTHORITARIANISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By mid 2018, the authoritarian regimes in Thailand and in the Philippines appear fully consolidated. In Thailand, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha took over power in a coup d'état in May 2014. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte was elected president in June 2016. Both countries are important examples for the rise new authoritarianism in Southeast Asia because they put a spotlight on the social basis of new authoritarianism. What is remarkable in both cases is the role of the middle-classes in the process of toppling the democratic systems and consolidating the new authoritarian regimes. As of mid-2018, despite his record of over 10,000 extrajudicial killings, Duterte enjoys up to 85% support in the polls, with a strong base among the middle-class inside the Philippines as well as the Philippine diaspora abroad (Bello, 2018; Focus on the Global South, 2017). In Thailand, the general support for Prayuth is most probably not as high. However, the middle-class was instrumental in 'inviting' the coup d'état in May 2014 by mobilizations on the streets of Bangkok between November 2013 and March 2014 (Prajak, 2016; Veerayooth & Hewison, 2016).

This directs the attention to the social base of the new authoritarian regimes in general. In Europe and the USA, a lively and controversial debate has evolved concerning the rise of Donald Trump or the electoral successes of right-wing authoritarian populist parties in France, Germany, and other countries. The two competing interpretations are potentially irreconcilable: One side draws on ideas from Hochschild (2016) and Eribon (2013), who see the base of new authoritarian regimes among the disenfranchised poor who are the losers of neoliberal globalization and who have been abandoned by the Democrat Party in the US (McQuarrie, 2017) or the European Social Democratic Parties (Sablowski & Thien, 2018). As Candeias (2017, p. 2) summarizes Eribon (2013), "the electoral decision for right wing parties is an 'act of political self-defence' – a measure taken in order to appear in the political discourse at all, if only in the form of 'negative self-affirmation' ". These approaches see a distorted class struggle hidden behind the xenophobic and nationalist discourse – distorted, because the elites which are voted into power by the marginalized poor effectively continue to pursue the same neoliberal policies which are the root cause for their misery. The revolt of the working class is described as a passive revolution. It stays conservative and authoritarian since it turns against migrant workers, LGBTIQ* and women's rights, and since – despite of an anti-elite discourse – targets only state representatives and does not challenge the bourgeoisie (Demirović, 2018, p. 41; Sablowski & Thien, 2018).

This analysis is challenged by interventions like Silver (2016), Lessenich (2016), Brand & Wissen (2017), Eversberg (2018). Instead of a class conflict and passive revolution, they see a genuine cross-class alliance with a shared interest as the social basis of new authoritarianism. Central to this line of reasoning is the concept of the *imperial mode of living* – a heuristic concept and research program proposed by Brand & Wissen (2017, 2018a, 2018b, in press) which brings an ecological and global aspect into the debate on the rise of new authoritarianism. It highlights that the dominant Western consumption patterns of the capitalist world – food, goods of daily consumption, patterns of mobility, communication technology – rely on unequal access to resources, sinks, and cheap labor in the Global South. On the one hand, the incorporation of increasing parts of the global population into these consumption patterns stabilizes the growth-based economic system through the demand of consumption goods. The generalization of the imperial mode of living also has the effect to stabilize society through the hegemonic incorporation of large parts of the population into consumerist material well-being. On the other hand, however, the accelerated use of resources, sinks, and cheap labor – triggered by the generalization of the imperial mode of living – is the driving force behind the ecological crisis and the crisis of social reproduction.

Eversberg (2018) and Brand and Wissen (in press, p. 1-3) use this concept to explain the rise of new authoritarianism in the Global North. They see the line of confrontation as mainly between industrialized centers of the North who are trying to defend the imperial mode of living in the face of the multiple crises which unfold since 2008. Rising external violence at the borders and internally against political dissent are explained with the increasing crisis-prone nature of the unsustainable accumulation regime.

Some aspects of this debate are not entirely new: Sablowski and Thien (2018, p. 67) criticize that Lessenich (2016) and Eversberg (2018) replicate and radicalize Lenin's

thesis of a workers' aristocracy or an embourgeoisement of the proletariat. Based on these ideas, one should bear in mind that, in the wake of 1968, internationalist-oriented activist scholars drew the conclusion that the revolutionary subject would have to be found outside the centers of the industrialized world. Consequently, they turned their attention to the revolutionary movements in the 'Third World' (Balsen & Rössel, 1986; Gäng & Reiche, 1967; Horlemann, 1968).

How does this debate about new authoritarianism in the Global North link to the rise of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia? The global view that Brand and Wissen (2017, pp. 95-123) introduce through their concept has two dimensions: First, a clear (conceptual) split between 'North' and 'South', in so far as the concept stresses that societies of the Global North draw on resources from the Global South through structural or direct violence. Another dimension is that the imperial mode of living – with its inbuilt tendency of generalization – becomes inscribed into societies of the Global South, too, especially in the dynamic capitalist societies of the Newly Industrialized Countries (Brand & Wissen, 2017, pp. 95-123, in press, pp. 1-2). Yet, Brand and Wissen (2017, pp. 109-110) also express their hope that new middle-classes in India and China will evolve as an emancipatory force, because they are exposed to the ecological consequences and the vicissitudes of this system in a more direct way than their Northern counterparts. Brand and Wissen (in press, p. 7) do stress that the situation is quite complex and concede that more research is needed. I argue that research on new authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is a promising field in this respect.

MIDDLE-CLASSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Analyzes of the democratization in Southeast Asia during the late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s heavily focused on middle-classes (Brown & Jones, 1995; Robison & Goodman, 1996). After years of economic growth – arguably a result of authoritarian developmental state policies – the *People Power* or EDSA movement in the Philippines toppled Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. In Thailand, the so-called *Mobile Mob* – Bangkok-based mass demonstrations of people who were recognized as middle-class by the mobile phones they used during the rallies – forced down the military in Thailand in 1992 (Anek, 1993; Callahan, 1998; Englehart, 2003; Ockey, 2004). The democratization processes were seen as an empirical proof of modernization theory, according to which economic growth brings about a rising middle-class which – on the basis of their education, but also of their life-style which allows them to take an interest in politics – starts demanding political participation (Lipset, 1960; Thompson, 1996; for a different analysis see Ji, 1997).

However, in both countries, shortly after the introduction of a multi-party system and free elections, the same middle-class movements – often with personal continuity of the leaders and, in the case of the Philippines, even using the same name – went against the popular elected governments. In 1999, the middle-class based *People Power II* or EDSAII movement forced elected president Joseph Estrada out of office. In Thailand in 2005/2006, activists who were behind the *Mobile Mob* in 1992 also were among those who mobilized against Thaksin Shinawatra (Pye & Schaffar, 2008). In both cases, the elected governments were attacked for being corrupt and populist,

since, in the wake of the Asia Crisis of 1997/1998, they promised the poor population welfare and social benefits (Aim & Arugay, 2015; Thompson, 2008, 2016).

The concept of the imperial mode of living gives us a powerful tool to re-conceptualize the orientation of middle-classes and its connection to class struggle. In the Philippines and in Thailand, the emergence of an urban middle-class the 1980s and 1990s can be characterized as spread of the imperial mode of living since their life-style rested on high consumption of resources and on cheap labor from the rural areas within the country – labor with predominantly informal forms of employment. When the Asia Crisis in 1997/1998 hit the region, this development was halted. Capital had to look for strategies to overcome the crisis and embraced different strategies of externalization. In Thailand, migrant workers from neighboring countries – Myanmar and Cambodia – were recruited to the production sites to lower the wages further. By the early 2000s, the number of migrant workers from Myanmar alone reached one and a half million (Eberle & Holliday, 2011; Kaur, 2010). The Philippines, under state sponsored programs for Philippinos/Philippinas to go abroad for work, became one the biggest exporters of cheap labor themselves (Rodriguez, 2010). It is against this background that processes of de-democratization unfolded.

In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra offered a growth-based Keynesian economic policy, with investment in rural infrastructure, social security schemes, and access to consumer credits. This "new social contract" (Hewison, 2006, p. 503) promised the poor access to and a co-option into what can be called an 'imperial mode of living'. It was the basis for Thaksin's huge and continuing electoral success, but also the reason behind the middle-class mobilization against him which rejected this social contract and sought to defend middle-class privileges against the aspirations of the poor (Saxer, 2014). The Thai urban middle-class' chauvinism is most clearly expressed in the discourse on alternative development paradigms. The poor in the North and Northeast of Thailand, who voted for Thaksin and his growth-based Keynesian economic policy, are blamed to embrace 'unsustainable' and 'irresponsible' consumerism and are advised to follow a Buddhist-inspired middle-path idea of moderation under the guidance of the royal concept of *sufficiency economy* (Schaffar, 2018; Walker, 2008a, 2008b). This ongoing conflict culminated in an alliance between the urban middle-class and elites to abolish the entire democratic system (Saxer, 2014; Schaffar, 2018).

Sablowski (2018, p. 1) in his criticism of Brand and Wissen (2017) argues that the imperial mode of living should be seen as a life-style of the bourgeoisie, rather than as a mode of living in the Global North. In Thailand, there is no difference between the two views: The class distinction between the middle- and the working-class on the one side, and the distinction of life-styles between an imperial mode of living and the life of the poor (subsistence farmers and informal workers) on the other side fall in one.[1] Moreover, spatial distinctions between consumerist cities (Bangkok) and exploited countryside (North and Northeast) are articulated along the same lines, too. What Brand and Wissen analyze as a North-South divide, in Thailand appears as a class division and a spatial division within the country.

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1 For a more detailed class analysis and a summary of contested views see Somchai (2006), Ji (2009), Naruemon & McCargo (2011), Walker (2012) and Sopranzetti (2012).

The concept of imperial mode of living thus allows us to re-visit modernization theory and add the aspect of ecological limits of growth and the global dimension of the crisis. If the experience of Thailand can be generalized, the predictions of modernization theory concerning the political orientation of middle-classes have to be reversed: Under the impression of multiple crises, and due to the ecological limits of growth and the limits to externalization, a further generalization of the imperial mode of living and an incorporation of wider parts of the working-class into its confines meets its limits within the country. The ubiquitous discourse on sufficiency economy and Sustainable Development Goals in Thailand shows that the middle-class has a strong consciousness of ecological problems and of their own vulnerability to climate change and floods (Brand & Wissen, 2017, pp. 109-110). But contrary to the expectation of Brand and Wissen (2017, pp. 109-110), middle-classes in Newly Industrialized Countries – rather than becoming an emancipatory social force – seem to turn into a base for authoritarianism and fascism (Bello, 2018; Schaffar, 2018).

However, another dynamic can also be observed and needs further investigation: Obviously, the anti-democratic movement in Thailand not only consisted of middle-class people, but also comprised unions and workers (Pye & Schaffar, 2008), part of which were incorporated into the alliance through a nationalist xenophobic (anti-Cambodian and anti-Myanmar) discourse (Pavin, 2015). This points to an interpretation along the lines of Demirović (2018) as well as Sablowski and Thien (2018). The trajectory of the Philippines, where President Duterte is supported by 85% of the population, demands for an explanation for this broad cross-class alliance, too. Bello (this volume) argues along the same lines and speaks of a passive revolution by which the poor are integrated into the authoritarian project of Duterte. However, he also points to a further complication: The vast number of Philippine migrant workers are known to be the strongest supporters of Duterte. Bello suggests analyzing their class-affiliation as two-fold: Frist, inside the Philippines, they count as middle-class in terms of their education, consumption patterns, and self-identification. Second, abroad they are part of a cheap reserve army of labor according to the kind of jobs available to them. This transnational electoral base with its ambiguous class affiliation provide a rich field of research where further studies are needed – studies bringing together debates in and on the Global North with debates in and on Southeast Asia.

One more aspect of this empirical field is worth mentioning. Middle-classes in most countries of Southeast Asia are closely connected to urban overseas Chinese who arrived in subsequent waves and – after periods of political marginalization and even prosecution – today are fully integrated into the societies of the countries (Menkhoff & Gerke, 2002). The support of authoritarian governments in Thailand and the Philippines, however, coincides with the re-orientation of Chinese descendent middle-classes towards China (Somsak, 2016). Kasian (2017) provided an in-depth analysis of the Thai development, where cultural and habitual orientation comes with a political orientation and support of authoritarianism. Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016), however, convincingly show that the tendency goes beyond the Thai case.

This opens the question to what extent we can conceptualize the imperial mode of living as a 'Western' phenomenon only. As it seems, with the rise of China as the new center of global economy, a new, equally unsustainable, but 'non-Western' imperial

mode of living is gaining ground and is becoming the hegemonic base for the new China-centered accumulation cycle. Can we speak therefore of a Chinese imperial mode of living? Does it constitute a new and different pattern, or does it simply replicate the 'Western' imperial mode of living, with different shades?

In the Global South, the re-orientation to China – explicitly performed by the authoritarian governments in the Philippines and Thailand (Focus on the Global South, 2017; Jory, 2017) – is presented and legitimized by with a post-colonial (or decolonial) flavor, as a shift away from Western domination towards an Asian alternative. Sometimes this shift is even connected with the hope for a different, non-neoliberal, and more sustainable version of development (Hoering, 2018; Solmecke, 2016, 2018). It seems, however, that the heavily growth-based Chinese economic projects, such as the Belt-and-Road Initiative in its present shape, are as much a "false alternative", as the Green New Deal[2] (Brand & Wissen, 2017, pp. 147-164). The post-colonial pose of this turn towards China and towards a Chinese version of globalization, also serves as legitimization of the rejection of Western liberalism and of democracy as such. In the search of a progressive internationalism, this ideological cleavage will be difficult to overcome.

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2 *Green New Deal* is an umbrella term referring to stimulus packages and investment programs, which were discussed in the wake of the multiple crisis of 2007/2008, such as the policies outlined in French, Renner & Gardener (2009).

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